

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
East Liberty Presbyterian Church
October 2, 2011 (World Communion Sunday)
Matthew 5:1-12
“Pursuing Justice: Living Beatitudes”

Two Pittsburgh seminary professors were talking one day about the Beatitudes. *(I know this sounds like the opening line of a joke; like, a priest, a minister and a rabbi walked into a bar: but it's not a joke. I happened to read commentaries on this bible passage written by Dale Allison and Edwin van Driel, two professors from the seminary.)* Anyway, two professors were talking about the Beatitudes and arguing over how we are to understand the passage today. The first one said, “For me, the Beatitudes are about seeing Jesus as the New Moses. There was a slaughter of infants back in the time of Pharaoh that Moses escaped, and there was one decreed by King Herod that Jesus escaped. Moses left from Egypt, and Mary, Joseph and Jesus came out of Egypt up to Nazareth. Moses began his real work after he passed through the waters of the sea and Jesus began his ministry after he passed through the waters of the Jordan River at his baptism. And both offered their wisdom from a mountaintop. Just as Moses gave the law from Mount Sinai, Jesus expanded on that law with his own sermon on the mount – telling people that the blessed ones are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, who are meek and merciful, and who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Jesus then went on to say that he had come not to abolish the law but to fulfill it. And we should strive to be perfect, as our heavenly Father is perfect (Mt 5:48). Therefore to me, the Beatitudes are when Jesus spoke as the New Moses.”

The second seminary professor scratched his chin in a scholarly manner and then said, “For me, the Beatitudes are about seeing Jesus as the New Isaiah, that Old Testament prophet of the time of exile and homecoming. Remember Isaiah 61; doesn't the prophet say, *I have been sent to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to comfort those who mourn, to give them the oil of gladness and the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.* Isn't that what happened when Jesus ascended the mountain and offered his Beatitudes? When he said, *Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven; blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth. The merciful shall receive mercy. The pure in heart shall see God.* The Beatitudes are not about Moses and his laws; they're not about what things we should do in order to be perfect. The Beatitudes are about offering comfort and grace, how God draws near to us in this broken and hurting world and gives us hope. To me, the Beatitudes are when Jesus spoke as the New Isaiah.”

Back and forth the two professors tussled over how to understand this passage. And there is something intriguing about both of their positions. The Beatitudes are like laws from a second Moses, setting before us ideals into which we are called to live; reminding us to be honor humility, to thirst for righteousness, to show mercy and work for peace, even when persecuted by others for our actions of faith and compassion. And yes, the Beatitudes are like promises of comfort from a second Isaiah, assuring us that God is near even as we are poor in spirit,

mourning the loss of loved ones as well as the loss of justice in our nation; telling us that we are children of God and will rest in a promised heavenly kingdom when the trials of this life are over. The Beatitudes are comforting sentiments of faith. But how do we make them come alive, so they will leap off the pages of history and be written on our hearts this day?

I don't have a scholarly, professorial answer for you today. I don't have a response from my head, but I offer instead an answer from my heart. I will set up this answer by first sharing three different anecdotes, and then I'll pull it together through an imaginary response given to the two seminary professors.

#1) Not too many years ago, the poet Mary Oliver lost her partner of over 40 years, Molly Malone Cook. In grieving over Molly's death, Mary wrote poems and went to church. One day after a communion service, she wrote these words: *I want to see Jesus, maybe in the clouds/ or on the shore, just walking, beautiful man/ and clearly someone else besides./ On the hard days I ask myself if I ever will./ Also there are times my body whispers to me that I have.*¹ The Beatitudes are part of Christ's response to us when we say out loud, things are hard for me: I mourn, I ache, I'm afraid, I'm tired. Lord, will I ever see you? And then our bodies whisper back to us, "Blessed are you, my child" and we know that we have.

#2) The singer Tony Bennett felt a special bond with the much younger singer Amy Winehouse. Earlier this year the two of them recorded a duet, and Bennett admired her singing style and her fluid, spontaneous improvisations. Winehouse died about 2 months ago from a drug overdose. She was only 27. Tony Bennett had his own issues with drugs and nearly died of a cocaine overdose 30 years ago. But a conversation with a Hollywood celebrity manager changed his life. Back in 1979, he was speaking with the man who used to manage the troubled comedian Lenny Bruce. Bennett asked "What did you think of Bruce?" and he replied, "He sinned against his talent." That comment made Bennett clean up his act. And now he wished he'd spoken to Winehouse about this. He said, "She had a gift. Don't sin against your talent."² The Beatitudes call us to live up to our fullest potential as children of God: striving for righteousness, working for peace, showing mercy, seeking to be pure in motivation and word and deed. To sin against our talent, to reject our calling is to miss out on the blessings of God.

#3) I don't remember where I heard this story this week, whether someone told it to me in person or if I heard it on the car radio while driving home one day. All I remember was that it involved an Army general who had served in Vietnam, and who was troubled by how difficult it was for his young soldiers to readjust to life once they returned home. He told how they had grown up believing to kill another person was abhorrent, but in war they were trained to consider the enemy as less than human. So they'd call them terrible names. And after times of battle, they'd carefully retrieve their own soldiers who'd been killed and put them in body bags to be sent home, but the Vietcong would be left where they'd fallen. Some soldiers even took souvenirs from the fallen enemies until this officer stopped them. And to teach them a lesson, he had them go back and bury the

Vietnamese soldiers. So they went, and dug holes and placed the fallen enemy in the dirt and covered them up. And as they did so, they wept. They began to see their shared humanity, feel the tragedy of this militaristic game, and mourn for the person they'd become. The general noted that getting the soldiers to grieve this way before returning home often made the adjustment to life away from the battlefield easier, for they'd worked through their emotions closer to the place that evoked them. The Beatitudes are about us as individuals and us as a society. To hear them and know that others around us whom we scarcely know, others the world over whom we've never met, are also being called "blessed," that may cause us to weep, or to breathe more deeply, or perhaps to see everyone as children of the One God. And that is a blessing. That is what makes them into living beatitudes.

To conclude: Two Pittsburgh seminary professors were talking about the Beatitudes. One said that they depicted Jesus as the New Moses, offering laws to inspire us to seek for the more excellent way of faith in daily life. Another said that they depicted Jesus as the New Isaiah, giving comfort to the marginalized and troubled today along with a promise of future rewards in heaven. At that point, they were interrupted by a seminary student, probably one of the exceptionally bright ones who are serving as interns here at ELPC. The student said, "Actually, it is not so much what was said in the Beatitudes that matters; rather, it is the fact that they were spoken at all. On that day long ago, disciples of Jesus and curious listeners heard Jesus call them 'blessed.' Suddenly they existed. They were no longer overlooked and underappreciated; even more importantly, they were no longer isolated souls with private wounds, doubts, and pain. When Jesus spoke they became a community. When Jesus taught them they became a church. When Jesus looked at them from that mountaintop, they became "blessed," which made them inheritors of the kingdom of God, filled, comforted, recipients of mercy, able to see God and know they belong to God."

The student went on. "Maybe Jesus spoke like Moses or the prophet Isaiah. But mostly he spoke like, well, like himself, like the Christ: one who was poor in spirit, meek, hungering for righteousness, thirsting for justice, showing mercy, working for peace, persecuted; yes, persecuted, reviled against, falsely accused of all kinds of evil. And yet in his way would be the way of life. He would lead people to a table; a literal world communion. He would take our place on a cross; all our places. And then he would lead forth from a tomb, the burial place of all false powers and lies and darkness, into a new place of resurrection. And once again he would say, "Blessed are you, for you see these things, know these things, and live these things as truth in your daily life together. Blessed are you. Blessed are you."

AMEN

¹ "The Vast Ocean Begins Just Outside Our Church: The Eucharist," Mary Oliver *Thirst*, 2006, pp. 24-25.

² *The Week*, September 23, 2011; vol. 11 - News, p. 10.